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SUBJECT: SURVEY OF SYRIAN WATER SECTOR - 2006

REF: A. 05 DAMASCUS 05788
[1](#)B. 02 AMMAN 08144
[1](#)C. 02 DAMASCUS 02280
[1](#)D. 04 BAGHDAD 00360
[1](#)E. AMMAN 04692
[1](#)F. AMMAN 05397
[1](#)G. BEIRUT 00831

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: After years of national water shortages, it has become clear that Syria faces a water crunch that, if not addressed comprehensively, will balloon into a crisis in the medium to long term. Rapidly growing demand for water from various sectors of Syrian society in recent years combined with a plateauing national water supply have squeezed Syria's water resources, leading to a chronic deficit that could be as high as 3 billion cubic meters, with demand outstripping supply by nearly 25%. The SARG is clearly cognizant of the predicament, but has been characteristically slow and inefficient with implementing identified coping mechanisms. In an effort to control water demand, the SARG has initiated steps to transition Syria's agricultural sector to modern, more water-efficient, irrigation techniques and upgrade municipal water networks to reduce massive waste of potable water. To boost Syria's water supply, the SARG is building wastewater treatment plants. At the same time, however, the population continues drilling wells and depleting the groundwater tables at a much faster rate. Given Syria's haphazard, uncoordinated water sector management by a disorganized bureaucracy, it is doubtful the SARG has the tools to implement new water policies it may develop. Given the trajectory of Syria's economy and demographic trends, the country's emerging water crisis carries the potential for severe economic volatility and even socio-political unrest. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Demand: The rapid growth in demand for water in Syria for a variety of uses is clearly the primary driving force behind the recent water shortages and future concerns. Although the exact water demand growth rate is unknown, the general consensus among independent sources we consulted is that it has risen consistently over the past several decades and accelerated in recent years. All sources agreed that the water demand growth rate certainly exceeds the 2.5% population growth rate, probably by quite a bit. As in the past, agricultural use constitutes the vast majority of

Syria,s water consumption, with estimates ranging from 75 to more than 90% of the total demand. The fastest growing component of water demand, however, is human consumption, fueled by the combination of Syria,s high population growth rate and increasing rates of urbanization. Industrial usage remains the smallest element of Syria,s water consumption, and a negligible factor to date in demand growth. Most sources identified Syria,s grossly inefficient use of water as the main impediment to controlling its water demand. These major inefficiencies include still rampant utilization of old-fashioned irrigation techniques such as &flooding8, extremely leaky water distribution networks, and wasteful behaviors by the general Syrian population that expects cheap, abundant water. In September 2005, Minister of Irrigation, Mahir al-Bunni, the SARG's top water official, announced the establishment of a General Commission for Water Resources, which ambitiously aims to save 5.4 million cubic meters per year by restructuring water sector management and rationalizing water use in Syria.

13. (SBU) Agriculture: The SARG has strived to expand Syria,s agriculture for decades in an effort to improve the country,s chronically underperforming economy. The Tenth Five-Year Plan, which went into effect in January 2006, seeks to boost agricultural production even further to diversify the economy in anticipation of vastly reduced oil production (ref A). Data gathered by the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Area (ICARDA), an independent international agricultural research institute headquartered in Syria (ref B), indicates that Syria more than doubled its land irrigated by groundwater (319,000 to 817,000 hectares) and nearly doubled its land irrigated by surface water without a pump (144,000 to 314,000 hectares)

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from the late 1980s to 2002. In 2002, Syria had over 1.3 million irrigated hectares and the SARG,s 2005-06 plan envisions 1.5 million irrigated hectares by the end of 2006. Most of Syria,s irrigated land is in the northeast of the country and serviced by the Euphrates River. According to statements by al-Bunni published in September 2005, Syrian agriculture consumes approximately 12 billion cubic meters of water per year, with 4.5 billion coming from dams (i.e. rivers) and the other 7.5 billion from groundwater sources. Given the SARG,s stated desire to expand agricultural production and land under irrigation, most experts we consulted expect this consumption figure to grow considerably.

14. (SBU) How much the agricultural sector expands over the medium-term depends on the implementation of the SARG,s initiative to transition to more water-efficient irrigation methods. Several sources noted the SARG,s longstanding official effort to shift agricultural production toward more water-efficient crops to contain water consumption. As proof, they cited the decrease in land used for water-&heavy8 crops such as cotton and corn. In September 2005, al-Bunni announced the creation of a 53 billion Syrian Pound (approximately USD 1 billion) fund to finance a ten-year transition to modern irrigation techniques among small farmers and peasants, who comprise the vast majority of Syrian agricultural producers. In addition to supporting farmers, acquisition of advanced irrigation infrastructure such as drip irrigation and sprinkler systems, the government would provide them with technical assistance to install, operate and maintain the new irrigation systems. An experienced Syrian water expert ventured that the SARG hopes ultimately to conserve 30% of the water currently consumed for agricultural purposes (mostly from the Euphrates out east), and redirect the savings to residential use in the country,s major metropolitan areas in the west.

15. (SBU) Expert opinions are mixed, however, on how successful the SARG,s initiative can be in the timeframe set out. Despite the absence of solid data, an ICARDA observer believed that a large portion of farmers have already adopted

modern irrigation techniques, with more poised to do so if additional funding and technical assistance became available.

He attributed much of Syria,s massive growth in agricultural production-per-unit over the past 25 years (e.g. a tripling of per-unit-production of wheat) to increasing water-efficiency, particularly the use of &supplemental irrigation8 (ref C). Skeptics, however, discount the SARG,s transition plan for several reasons. First, being &old-fashioned8 creatures of habit and suspicious of the government, farmers will oppose the new irrigation technology on psychological grounds. Critics also doubted that the SARG would follow through with the technical assistance critical to getting the new irrigation systems up and running effectively. In addition, despite the availability of loans, the costs required to purchase and maintain the news systems are prohibitive for the vast majority of Syria,s subsistence farmers. (Comment: It seems likely that the farmers noted by ICARDA, who had already adopted water-efficient irrigation techniques, are the ones most capable of change, thus leaving the most challenging segment of the farmer population still to be converted to modern irrigation. End comment.) Third, low fuel and labor costs (for pumping ground water) and no penalties for excessive water use discourage farmers from changing their current irrigation practices. Finally, the fragmented, small-scale nature of Syrian agriculture) namely the millions of Syrian farmers who farm tiny swaths of land who will have to be convinced to change -- will prevent a quick transition to modern irrigation techniques and greater water efficiency.

¶6. (SBU) Human Consumption: Though the SARG,s efforts to expand the utilization of more water-efficient irrigation systems may slow the growth in agricultural consumption of water if the government becomes more serious about implementation, residential (i.e. human) use of water is booming with no end in sight. Residential water use - consisting of drinking, cleaning, and septic/sewage disposal

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) comprises a small but rapidly growing segment of total consumption, according to a University of Aleppo water expert. More than 90% of the Syrian population has access to potable water. Syria consumes potable water at the relatively high rate of 200 liters per capita per day. The potable water crunch is, not surprisingly, most acute in Syria,s cities. The Damascus metropolitan area (including the surrounding &suburbs8) faces an especially desperate situation. According to the DG of Damascus Suburbs Water Establishment Dr. Abdel Nasr Sa,alluddin, the Damascus area currently suffers an annual water deficit of 400 million cubic meters. High population growth and rates of urbanization are further taxing the already-dilapidated municipal water networks and limited local water supply. There is no consensus on the best ways to restrict residential water consumption. One means to control residential water usage includes more stringent water rationing, which seems all but inevitable in the future. The main barrier, however, appears psychological: Syrians view water as a cheap public good to be used as much as they desire rather than as a commodity of limited quantity) because water is so heavily subsidized. One cubic meter of water costs six Syrian Pounds on average, but sells for 3.5 Syrian Pounds. Furthermore, vast quantities of water are stolen for free from the network. For political reasons, the SARG is hesitant to reduce subsidization or pursue cost-recovery.

¶7. (SBU) Industry: Industrial use of water makes up a relatively small portion and diminishing percentage of Syria,s total water consumption. One local expert called the water needs of Syrian industry &neither high nor significant8, a sentiment shared by all sources consulted. Another source explained that the SARG does not monitor industrial consumption of water, but he estimated industrial water use in Syria as somewhat less than residential use. He added that industrial demands on the water supply remain

relatively constant. Industrial zones, however, contribute significantly to pollution of both groundwater sources and rivers basins. Water pollution, in turn, causes major health problems among the local population, requires more water treatment plants for which the SARG lacks the funding and even causes friction in Syria,s relations with neighboring countries. A resident Turkish diplomat complained that Syria,s pollution of the Orontes River by refineries and factories around Homs was destroying agriculture in his country,s Iskenderia province.

18. (SBU) Supply: Enhancing and enlarging Syria,s water supply remains a top SARG priority, one the government is presently pursuing with a heightened sense of urgency. The SARG has been pushing all possible levers for some time8 to maximize output from Syria,s water sources, according to one ICARDA expert. Syria draws water from a broad array of surface, ground and rain water sources, but does not yet desalinize seawater. The SARG is also boosting its capacity to treat and recycle wastewater (exclusively for agricultural use). With the quantity of rain exogenously determined and low to begin with, river sources generally limited by political factors, and treated wastewater not yet a major contributor of supply, Syria has used groundwater to fill its annual deficit. This dynamic has caused severe, even dangerous, depletion of the country,s aquifers.

19. (SBU) Surface Water: Syria has 16 main rivers and tributaries, including six major international rivers (Euphrates, Tigris, Orontes, Yarmouk, Al-Kabir and Afrin). Surface water comprises about a third of Syria,s total water supply. Although several Syrian rivers and springs in the country,s more arid regions have dried up considerably in recent years, exacerbating the water crunch especially in Damascus, Syria could boost its total surface water supply by pumping water from the Tigris River.

110. (SBU) According to all sources, Syria presently extracts only a negligible amount of water from the Tigris. In the 1980s, the SARG had plans to irrigate 150,000 hectares with water from the Tigris, but never implemented the

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program. Syria,s increasingly desperate water situation and plans to boost agricultural production have led to renewed talk of pumping water from the Tigris, but the SARG has not taken any concrete action or even indicated an intent in this direction. Most observers concurred that Syria has not yet tapped the Tigris because it lacks the equipment to do so, and the funds for the requisite technology.

111. (SBU) Originating in Turkey, the Euphrates is by far the largest river in Syria with 680 km located within Syrian territory and an average rate of flow over the past two years of 745 cubic meters per second (m3/s). (Note: By contrast, the average rates for all Syria,s other rivers did not top ten m3/s in 2004. End Note.) The Euphrates constitutes Syria,s primary source for irrigation water and hydroelectricity generation. In a 1987 Protocol signed between Turkey and Syria, Turkey guaranteed to provide Syria a minimum average monthly flow from the Euphrates of 500 m3/s. A 1990 treaty between Syria and Iraq codified that Syria would keep 42% of the total flow of the Euphrates received from Turkey and pass 58% on to Iraq, irrespective of variations in flow. In recent years, however, Turkey has released more than the 500 m3/s guaranteed by the protocol, according to both SARG and GOT sources. In 2004 and 2005, the average flows of the Euphrates in Syria were 757 m3/s and 732 m3/s, respectively. But this excess will not persist forever, as an official Turkish source asserted that dams upstream associated with the GOT,s GAP (Southeastern Anatolia) project would basically eliminate major fluctuations in the Euphrates flow such that Syria would receive a regularized flow of 500-600 m3/s every month regardless of the season. He also indicated that Turkey would continue providing the 500 m3/s minimum flow to Syria

indefinitely absent a comprehensive agreement, but warned that the GOT had no obligation to continue releasing these higher flows, adding that Syria could not count on more than the guaranteed 500 m³/s flow in the future.

¶12. (SBU) In response to severe water shortages in Damascus resulting from years of drought and exploding demand, Syrian water authorities turned to the Barada River to bolster supply. About six years ago, the Damascus municipality began pumping water from the Barada and built a pipeline that can transport one m³/s of the river, s average 2.7 m³/s flow to the city to supplement other sources. This project, however, represents a short-term &band-aid solution to the capital, s deteriorating water situation. Both the al-Awaj and the Barada Rivers that supply Damascus are quickly drying up, such that the main source of potable water for Damascus is now the Al-Fija spring. A local Syrian water expert stressed that the Barada, Fija, and groundwater &cocktail would not keep up with Damascus, chronic water deficits in the medium to long-term.

¶13. (SBU) Groundwater: Groundwater sources account for nearly two-thirds of Syria, s total water supply and provide the vast majority of its potable water, although no exact figures are available. Thus, stemming the rapid depletion of groundwater tables throughout the country is a chief concern of the SARG. In the Aleppo area, groundwater tables have dropped one to three m/yr., descending from 60 to 105 meters below the surface in the past 20 years, strictly due to irrigation. Heightening the concern is the fact that in Syria, s arid regions, where groundwater plays an even more critical role in the local economy and daily life, the tables are not replenished by rain or irrigation seepage. According to ICARDA, s experts, the sustainability of groundwater) more than any other factor - will determine the long-term viability of Syria, s agricultural sector. Inefficient irrigation systems, highly subsidized diesel fuel (for water pumps), cheap labor and lack of metering have resulted in over-pumping of groundwater sources and widespread drilling of ever-deeper wells. Indeed, well-drilling among Syrians, for both agricultural and residential purposes, has reached epic proportions. Water shortages in the main springs serving Damascus and suburbs (due in part to consistent droughts) have forced the utilization of groundwater on a massive scale. The Damascus Directorate of Water Resources

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reported in July 2006 that over 50,000 wells exist in the Damascus greater metropolitan area, of which only 12,000 are legal. (Note: Syrian law requires that &legal wells have permits and meters, so that the government can monitor water consumption from them. Syrians frequently circumvent the SARG, s monitoring efforts. End note.)

¶14. (SBU) Rainwater: Rain does not make up a significant portion of Syria, s total water supply. Syria, s Coastal basin, north of Lebanon, receives in excess of 350 mm of rainfall per year, giving this region a modest annual water surplus and keeping it fertile for agriculture. Syria harvests some rainwater, but not a significant amount, from this basin. More arid climates elsewhere in the country produce evaporation rates that prevent any usable accumulation of rainwater.

¶15. (SBU) Treated wastewater: Syria is increasingly turning to wastewater to bolster its water supply, but financing new water treatment facilities is a major inhibitor. Syria has long used treated wastewater, produced by residential and industrial activities, exclusively for irrigation. (Note: Syria currently does not treat wastewater in order to make it potable or acceptable for residential usage. End note.) The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reported that in 1993 Syria treated 60% of its wastewater, and all independent sources concur that since then the SARG has expanded these efforts modestly in an attempt to ameliorate the country, s persistent water shortages and boost its agricultural

production. The Ministry of Housing expects to complete construction on two sewage treatment plants by the end of 2006 and four more in 2007, but this would not make much of a dent in Damascus, current 400 million m3 water deficit. Based on the current round of treatment plant-construction and the SARG,s fiscal position, Syria,s future efforts to expand Syria,s supply of treated wastewater will depend on the availability of foreign financing.

¶16. (SBU) Desalinization: At present, Syria has no desalinization plants due to the high expense of such technology and the current availability of cheaper sources of potable water. Independent experts, however, agree that, given rising residential water demand, Syria will almost inevitably have to build desalinization facilities in another decade or so as the potable water supply from other sources peaks.

¶17. (SBU) Infrastructure: Water networks: Of poor quality to begin with, Syria,s generally dilapidated municipal water networks waste 40-60% of the water that passes through them and pollutes much of the rest of the water that does not leak out, according to SARG officials and Syrian academics. The SARG has initiated an effort to repair this antiquated infrastructure. The government,s revamping of the networks began about five years ago in Damascus where the Japanese funded the complete replacement of the Damascus city water pipes over a lengthy period. In the past year, the effort has broadened to other municipalities, where the upgrading process has slowed. European financing) including a 90 million loan from European Investment Bank and a 26.7 million loan from the German Construction Bank) will fund the SARG,s program to broaden the Damascus potable water network further into the suburbs, starting in 2007.

¶18. (SBU) Dams: Syria,s 159 dams, mostly regulatory in nature, have storage capacity exceeding 15.8 cubic kilometers. Syria has nine dams currently under construction or not yet in operation. Many of Syria,s dams are approaching the end of their lifecycles and require extensive (and expensive) repairs, according to a Syrian source. Syria,s many outdated, Eastern Bloc-designed and constructed dams raise a host of safety concerns as well. The 2002 breach of the Zeyzoun Dam (Syria,s fourth largest in terms of storage capacity), which caused significant economic and humanitarian damage (ref D), provided a wake-up call to the SARG. Since the Zeyzoun disaster, the SARG has quietly begun reinforcing its major dams, particularly those on the Euphrates due to lingering fears of a possible collapse of

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Turkey,s mammoth Ataturk Dam. By contrast, the SARG has so far neglected to renovate the drainage systems of the Euphrates dams because of the prohibitive cost. The dysfunctional drainage system puts 10,000 hectares of irrigated land out of production each year through over-salinization.

¶19. (SBU) Pipelines: To meet the long-term water needs of Damascus and its suburbs, the SARG has been exploring two massive projects to transport water from well-endowed sources to the ailing city: 1) the Euphrates-Damascus pipeline, and 2) the Coast-Damascus pipeline. Both projects present major technical hurdles and financial burdens because they would require widespread use of expensive counter-gravity pumps. The price tag for each pipeline would exceed \$1.5 billion -- probably by a lot, given the SARG,s history of cost underestimation. The SARG has recently shown more interest in the Coast-Damascus pipeline, as it presents three advantages. First, coastal basin water is less polluted than the oversalinated Euphrates water, especially important because most of the water would go toward human consumption. Second, the SARG could avoid international politics with the Coast-Damascus pipeline, but would have to engage with its downstream neighbor, Iraq, in order to pursue the Euphrates pipeline option. Finally, if the SARG eventually developed a

desalinization capability on Syria,s Mediterranean coast, as most experts anticipate, it could link the desalinized water supply to the Coastal pipeline. The Coast-Damascus pipeline project was undergoing a feasibility study, as the SARG hoped to operationalize the pipeline by 2020, but has been delayed indefinitely due to funding problems.

¶20. (SBU) Water Sector Management and Governance: "Too many cooks in the kitchen": Syrian water sector management is plagued by overlapping agency portfolios, fragmented and vague water laws, unqualified staff, minimal coordination among government departments, and inadequate centralized planning and oversight. Officially, the SARG,s water sector governance institutions consists of: the Ministry of Irrigation (ostensibly the lead water sector agency); the Ministry of Agriculture, Directorate of Irrigation and Water Uses; the Ministry of Housing and Public Services, Directorate of Water Supply and Waste Water; the State Planning Commission,s Irrigation and Agriculture Sector; the State Environmental Affairs Commission,s Water Environment Safety Sector; the Ministry of Local Government; and a host of municipal water directorates. In July 2006, the DG of the Damascus Directorate of Water Resources complained publicly about the SARG,s lack of coordinated management of the water sector, blaming the failure on the existence of too many water authorities who did not cooperate. Recognizing its dysfunction, the SARG proposed a plan in September 2005 to establish a General Commission for Water Resources that would restructure the Irrigation Ministry to create a central authority for managing water resources and local authorities for utilizing water. Exacerbating the difficulties of managing Syria,s water resources, the SARG possesses no systematic data management, storage or collection networks with which to monitor the country,s water situation. In fact, demonstrating its weak governing capabilities and fundamental information deficiencies, the SARG has so far utterly failed even to implement its 2000 plan to enhance monitoring of water resources by installing meters on all groundwater pumps around the country.

¶21. (SBU) International Relations: Syria shares surface water resources with all of its neighbors, except Israel. (Note: The issue of water rights in the Sea of Galilee represents one the main sticking points in Syrian-Israeli negotiations over the future of the Golan. End Note.) Syria relies on its riparian neighbors, particularly Turkey which controls the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, for a substantial portion of its water supply. Given the regional scarcity of water and Syria,s own modest resources, water has been a politicized and generally contentious issue between Syria and its neighbors for years.

¶22. (SBU) Tripartite Negotiations on the Tigris-Euphrates

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Basin: Management of this basin continues to top the SARG,s international water agenda because of the Syrian economy,s reliance on irrigation water from the Euphrates. Despite a warming of Turkish-Syrian and Turkish-Iraqi relations the past few years, negotiations to reach a comprehensive agreement on the future of the Tigris-Euphrates Basin by the three riparian states show no significant signs of resuming. A locally-based Turkish diplomat cites Syria and Iraq,s unrealistic demands, lack of information-sharing and inefficient water infrastructure as obstacles to progress. He stated that the GOT viewed the SARG,s recent public praise of Turkey for releasing more than 500 m3/s from the Euphrates and private acknowledgement of Syria,s benefit of Turkey,s regulation of the Euphrates as good signs of Syria,s desire to reengage on the future of the basin. The Turkish diplomat identified the Iraqis as the main stumbling block to resuming negotiations, observing that &this issue is not Iraq,s top priority right now.8

¶23. (SBU) Turkey: Having ceased accusing Turkey of both polluting the Euphrates and using water as a political

weapon, Syria has recently used its official press to praise Turkey,s management of the Euphrates headwaters. Nevertheless, Syria publicly opposes Turkey,s plans to build the Ilisu Dam on the Tigris. Syria,s greatest concern vis--vis water relations with Turkey will remain the flow it receives from the Euphrates.

¶24. (SBU) Even though negotiations on the Tigris-Euphrates basin remain stalled, Syria and Turkey seem poised to increase cooperation on the Orontes River. The local Turkish diplomat mentioned two promising joint projects still in their infancy. The first is an &Early Warning System8 for floods managed by a Syrian-Turkish technical committee. The diplomat explained that the GOT was ready to begin forming and planning the technical committee, but was waiting on the SARG to produce its delegation of technical experts to compose half the Joint Committee, which he expected to start meeting in September 2006. The second is a dam on the Syrian-Turkish border. The Turkish diplomat remarked that fairly intense GOT-SARG discussions on such a project had occurred, but noted that Turkey was again waiting on Syria to move forward.

¶25. (SBU) Iraq: Other than voicing joint opposition to Turkish dam-building on the Tigris River, Syria and Iraq have taken no noticeable steps to engage on water issues. It does not appear that Iraq,s Water Minister, whom Syria had invited to Damascus for talks in 2004 (ref E), ever accepted.

¶26. (SBU) Jordan: Water resources remain a source of friction in Syrian-Jordanian relations, in spite of the completion and inauguration of the &Unity8 Dam on the border in 2006. Jordanian officials continue to complain about Syria,s pollution of the Yarmouk River, illegal dam-building and capture of water that should flow into Jordan (ref F). On the other hand, the SARG normally publicizes its annual release of three to seven million cubic meters of water to Jordan as being a response to an official plea from the GOJ. This year, in an apparent gesture of goodwill, the SARG quietly released the annual allotment of water to Jordan without the attendant negative press. At a June 2006 meeting of the Jordanian-Syrian Higher Committee, a joint technical committee co-chaired by both countries, PMs, the GOJ and the SARG signed a cooperation agreement on water-sharing (ref G). The details of this agreement have not become public.

¶27. (SBU) Lebanon: According to Syrian and international water experts, Lebanon is a natural net water exporter whose overabundant supply has historically languished because of inefficient infrastructure and incompetent resource management (ref H). Under their current agreement, Lebanon draws 80 million m3/year of water from the Orontes River, with the remainder flowing to Syria. It is not unreasonable to imagine Lebanon, under the right circumstances, becoming an important water source for Syria in the long run.

¶28. (SBU) Comment: With groundwater tables severely

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depleted and surface water supplies from abroad essentially fixed, efforts to make up Syria,s water shortfalls by boosting supply via water treatment facilities, desalinization plants and intranational pipelines appear to hold the most promise. Yet these artificial solutions are extremely, perhaps prohibitively, expensive. Faced with seriously declining oil production, the SARG is looking to Syria,s agricultural sector to compensate, but ongoing water shortages jeopardize the sustainability of Syria,s agricultural expansion. A prolonged period of under-satisfied urban residential demand for water constitutes another potential source of social turmoil. Finally, if the technological solutions to Syria,s persistent water deficits prove infeasible, the SARG may aggressively pursue additional water supply from surface sources that it shares with its neighbors.

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